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ABSTRACT

To successfully reach out to a diversity of learners requires substantial support. The Digest addresses some sources of support intended as a complement to and a scaffold for teachers and administrators who experiment with different ways of meeting a diversity of learning needs. It highlights ways in which classroom teachers and learning center teachers can provide curricular congruence in language arts instruction. Similar to the intent of Curricular Congruence is the changing role of the special education teacher serving as a team teacher. This inclusionary perspective helps learners with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities to be successful in the heterogeneous classroom. An important source of support for students and teachers are parent volunteers and teacher aides, especially when they are surveyed first as to the type of help they can provide. The Digest also argues for literacy-rich classrooms and flexible technological resources, especially for disabled learners. (NKA)

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Student Diversity and Learning Needs

by Joseph Sanacore

To successfully reach out to a diversity of learners requires substantial support. Although budget-minded critics will argue that such support is costly, they need to be reminded that an investment in prevention today will eliminate or lessen the expense of remediation tomorrow. Not surprisingly, educators who receive substantial help are more effective when carrying out worthwhile innovations that increase all students' potential for success. This notion of support is vitally important because students' "at-riskness" will not disappear and because the government and educational community continue to believe in the efficacy of raising academic standards. This Digest will discuss some sources of support intended as a complement to and a scaffold for teachers and administrators who experiment with different ways of meeting a diversity of learning needs.

Curricular Congruence

At-risk learners benefit from instructional activities that are carefully planned and mutually supported by classroom teachers and learning center staff (Nelson, 1994). Unfortunately, many schools provide separate instruction in both settings. For example, in the English classroom, students may explore the theme of good and evil by reading and discussing William Golding's "Lord of the Flies," whereas in the learning center, at-risk students may complete workbook exercises and other fragmented activities unrelated to the instructional theme. Clearly, at-risk learners are more likely to be successful when classroom and learning center teachers provide them with congruent goals, resources, strategies, and skills.

A model that can be adapted to both push-in and pull-out efforts represents an ambitious approach, but it can be a major source of support for at-risk learners (Sanacore, 1988). Specifically, these learners receive language arts instruction 7 periods a week. Twice a week, the majority of students experience a double period of instruction, while the at-risk learners are enriched with activities that support the language arts program. If "Lord of the Flies" is being highlighted, the classroom teacher might immerse students in interactive activities concerning important themes, concepts, and vocabulary of the novel. Meanwhile, the learning center teacher might engage individuals in a similar instructional focus, while providing support through a prereading plan, structured overview, semantic mapping, or semantic feature analysis.

An important part of this classroom/learning center connection is cooperative planning time that is built into the teaching assignments of the English staff (Raywid, 1993). These professionals are scheduled weekly for 20-minute periods of teaching and for one period of mutual planning with the learning center staff. During the planning session, the key players discuss their community of learners and organize congruent activities that support effective learning.

Creating a closer link between the classroom and the learning center makes sense. This approach increases transfer of learning and simultaneously lessens the incidence of fragmented, reductionistic teaching. Thus, at-risk learners have more opportunities to engage in cohesive instruction directly related to their learning strengths and needs. Although curricular congruence is not a cure-all, it is a serious source of support for helping at-risk learners to be successful and independent.

Special Education Teacher as Team Teacher

Similar to the intent of curricular congruence is the changing role of the special education teacher serving as a team teacher. This inclusionary perspective helps learners with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities to be successful in the heterogeneous classroom and, thus, to be genuine members of the learning community. In a chapter of Villa and Thousand's "Creating an Inclusive School" (1995), middle grades science teacher Nancy Keller and special educator Lia Cravedi-Cheng describe their bonding as team teachers, which led to the social and academic growth of themselves and their students. Initially, the key players decided to meet at least one period each week for mutual planning. During this time, they focused on building a trusting relationship as they defined and redefined professional roles, discussed content to be covered, planned related instructional activities, and assessed student outcomes. These and other planning agendas set the stage for continued growth with a variety of joint responsibilities (i.e., having parent conferences, managing student behavior). While reflecting on their professional growth, Keller and Cravedi-Cheng realized that successful inclusion occurs when both teachers and students receive support. Planning cooperatively, developing goals, maintaining personal accountability helped the teachers to merge their talents, to reaffirm their commitment to all students, and to reach their audience academically and socially. As was

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expected, both special needs students and their nondisabled peers became contributing members of the learning community.

Cheryl Jorgensen (1995) describes an interdisciplinary program at Souhegan High School in New Hampshire. The learning environment for grades 9 and 10 involves 2 teams for each grade level, with approximately 85 students in each team. Social studies, science, English, and special education teachers share daily blocks of time morning and afternoon, and these professionals may organize instruction in a variety of ways to accommodate students' learning needs. An important part of these efforts is collaborative planning time for content area teachers and special educators.

Interestingly, special needs students at Souhegan High do not usually require instructional modifications in their heterogeneously grouped classes; however, when support is needed for nurturing full participation, it may be provided by peers, adults, adapted resources, or assistive technology. Individuals also benefit from modified expectations--for example, a physically disabled learner may have his or her lines in a play tape-recorded by a classmate. When the lines are to spoken aloud, the disabled learner leans on a pressure switch which then activates the lines.

Volunteers and Paraprofessionals

Another source of help for students and teachers in a heterogeneous learning environment is an "extra set of hands." In "The Reading Resource Handbook for School Leaders" (1996), Patty, Maschoff, and Ransom provide useful insights about parent volunteers and teacher aides supporting the language arts program. Specifically, these individuals may nurture learning by functioning as effective role models, reading to students, listening to them read, listening to their retellings after silent reading, asking challenging questions concerning their reading, coaching their efforts, sharing and monitoring reading and writing, developing instructional materials, administering interest and attitude inventories, organizing a classroom newspaper, assisting with bulletin boards and classroom displays that encourage reading and writing, and serving as a resource during field trips. Volunteers and aides can make valuable contributions to the classroom context, and their support is vitally needed to accommodate the diversity of learning needs which has increased markedly in recent years. Well-constructed questionnaires surveying parents and potential volunteers can provide useful information that can lead to a functional plan of action for eliciting, managing, and developing effective volunteers and aides.

Instructional Resources

Students' journey toward success also involves natural immersion in authentic resources. All learners, including those at risk of failing, benefit from literacy-rich classrooms cluttered with paperbacks, anthologies, fiction and nonfiction works, dramas and comedies, poetry, illustrated books, "how-to" manuals, bibliotherapeutic stories, talking books, large-print books, dictionaries, magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets. Students are more apt to respond positively to these materials when they are permitted to choose from a wide variety of options, when they observe teachers respecting their choices, and when they are encouraged to read at their own comfortable pace in the classroom.

Being sensitive to students' interests and strengths will also help them to meet content area expectations, especially if teaching and learning are organized around important themes and concepts. For example, if the instructional unit concerns the Civil War, and individual may demonstrate his or her preferred learning style by reading illustrated materials and by creating a flow chart showing important battles. Others may respond to thematic and conceptual aspects of the study unit in ways that represent their unique styles, as the teacher guides them to focus on instructional outcomes that fulfill curricular expectations. These flexible considerations not only provide immediate learning benefits, but also promote a lifelong love of learning.

Not surprisingly, this flexibility also applies to technological resources, which play a major role in helping students to be successful. Disabled learners, in particular, may benefit from adaptive hardware, such as seating devices, switches, electronic communication aids, and computers that scan printed materials and read the text aloud. Although appropriate instructional resources can facilitate learning in heterogeneous classrooms, a problematic economy has caused school administrators to allocate budgets for the basic curricula. Administrators need to work with parents and the community to provide a wide variety of resources to support students and teachers (Mendez-Morse, 1991). This effort increases the chances that special needs students and their nondisabled classmates will respond positively to literacy learning and will use it throughout their lives.

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